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LIBRARY READING IN THE HIGH SCHOOL

IV

PERSONAL GUIDANCE

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After all, in the library-reading work, it is the individual guidance which really counts. The teacher can do her best for her classes only when she has been long enough in the school to know each pupil personally, together with his home influences, his tastes, and his possibilities. Since this condition is perfectly attainable only in the smaller high schools, it would seem to follow that the most excellent results may be secured in villages, and towns of no great size, where the personal contact of teacher and pupil is the easy and usual thing. Such is actually the case. A genuine delight in reading and a real, if rudimentary, satisfaction in the finest kinds of literature can be best developed where there is a book-loving teacher, and a group of boys and girls whom she knows and understands. Nevertheless, in any school, large or small, much individual work can be done. To this end, the teacher should study her pupils, and strive to adapt herself most constantly to their varying natures and needs.

There are diverse types of students with whom one has to deal. The one which comes most spontaneously to mind is the freshman or sophomore boy who reads lurid tales of the *Diamond Dick* order, or who revels in the fantastic lucubrations of Kirk Munroe and Harry Castlemon. Now, there is nothing particularly alarming in a small boy's taste for books of the kind just indicated. It simply means that he is a boylike boy, who has a liking for the concrete, and loves action, and energy, and heroism, as he properly should. He has not yet discovered that the qualities which he admires in a piece of reading may be found in a more literary guise than in the *Diamond Dick* books. His companions are zealous in supplying him with their pyrotechnic

literature, and because the pamphlets are cheap, and accessible, and illustrated, he himself buys and exchanges with his friends. If parents and teachers used the same methods, with better books, they might perhaps create somewhat as vital an interest. At any rate, when a boy who reads dime novels finds his way into a library-reading class, he is a problem which has to be met frankly and intelligently. One cannot transfer a healthy boy from *Six-Fingered Mike*, *The Cowboy King*, to George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, and expect on his part very enthusiastic acceptance of the change. It will be a long time before he really relishes "standard books." It is hard for grown-up people to remember that the love for literature is a plant of slow growth, and that their own tastes have been an "uncertain" number of years in maturing. Have patience with the lad with a fondness for the lurid, and be careful not to condemn his likes and dislikes. Do not scold him because he is what he is. Accept his mental status, and try him on *Treasure Island*, or *Phroso*, or *The Virginian*, or any other good or fairish piece of work with plenty of conversation in it, along with a large allowance of blood-letting, and "swash-buckling," and hairbreadth escapes. Little by little, he will come to read, and willingly, too, a quality of literature, not equal, of course, to the masterpieces, but in its way worthy and acceptable. He will still read Henty occasionally, and will sometimes fall back on Oliver Optic for refreshment, but such authors will not hurt him in the least, provided that he has acquired an outlook toward something better. "I have to read one of those books about once in three months now," said a bright boy who was learning to eschew the Castlemon style of writings, "but I think that pretty soon I can get along without them altogether." And he did without any difficulty, in the course of a year.

The sentimental girl who loves the Duchess, and Mary J. Holmes, one is likely to find in one's classes. Pursue with her the same tactics of toleration that have been indicated above. Lead her by the lure of semi-sentimental books toward something more healthful and virile. It may be necessary to begin with Rosa N. Carey and Edna Lyall, but perhaps one need not go that far down the line. *The Princess Aline* is a well-written and

attractive book that girls will read with interest. The same may be said of Mrs. Barr's *A Bow of Orange Ribbon*, and Blanche Willis Howard's *One Summer*. Expecting no sudden transformations, provide plenty of easy reading, abounding in cheerful and honest sentiment (not sentimentalism), and almost any girl will soon become reconciled to sane and sensible literature.

The boy (or sometimes it is a girl) who, from sheer stupidity, or from love of action, does not care to read at all, is a harder problem. Reading aloud, by the teacher, will often serve to stimulate the unliterary person to finish the story for himself. Try such boys on short books that require little effort, and brief concentration, like *The Trail of the Sand Hill Stag*, or *Watchers of the Camp-Fire*. The girl will read *The Madonna of the Tubs*, *Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch*, *The Casting Away of Mrs. Lecks* and *Mrs. Aleshine*. Do not let these unfortunate scorers of books attempt anything long, or dry, or complicated. Simple, straightforward narrative, with much conversation, and a modicum of humor will usually win them, and engender in their hearts a toleration for reading that may develop later into something creditable and unexpectedly literary.

On the other hand, there is a type that exists in every school—the pupil who reads too much, even of passably good literature. He neglects his other work, ruins his eyesight, and fails to take the outdoor exercise essential for his best development. It is the teacher's task, in a measure accordant to the pupil's age and the quality of the books he is reading, to restrain his passion for literature within reasonable bounds. It will probably be better for him to read fewer books but those of a more solid nature. If he is reading only fiction, even tolerably good, one may tempt him to essays, and travel, and history of the style bordering on fiction, or written in an easy, conversational way. *My Summer in a Garden*, *Travels with a Donkey*, *Silverado Squatters*, and Parkman's historical series will usually appeal to children who read easily. If the pupil reads too much, even of non-fiction, as is sometimes, though rarely, the case, the teacher can simply make his reading still more solid. There are exceptionally bright high-school boys who will read with eagerness Darwin's *Origin of*

Species, Huxley's *Man's Place in Nature*, and other books on kindred subjects. They would, if their attention were not called to these volumes, go on devouring an endless number of less valuable books.

Once in a while, one meets an omnivorous reader of the brilliant, absorptive type, who instinctively chooses the best, and who reads an amount that, if required, would appall the ordinary pupil to the point of heart-failure. It seems best, as a rule, to let such a pupil take his course, interfering as little as possible, suggesting a suitable book now and then, and relying upon nature to strike a happy balance.

It would be possible to go on enumerating the different kinds of personalities to be dealt with; but the truth is, every child is really a type of his own. The greatest defect of the present educational system is that it tries to reduce every individual to the dead level of the commonplace. Every child is expected to do exactly the same thing, in exactly the same way. Here, at least, in the library-reading work, is an opportunity to differentiate. One pupil can do what he is ready and able to, regardless of what another is doing. Allowances can always be made for individual weakness, and individual strength. The most abiding satisfaction which the teacher can find in the work is the consciousness that it can be made to contribute directly and personally to the development of every pupil in her classes.